

CATEGORIES OF INFORMATION SOUGHT BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WHILE WORKING ON A WRITTEN COMPOSITION IN ENGLISH

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Abstract: Identifying specific categories of linguistic information (e.g. spelling) perceived as important by particular groups of dictionary users has been subject to many analyses. The main difference between those studies and the study undertaken by this author is the data collection method used: in their case a questionnaire and here a corpus of students' compositions which they were asked to read again, marking the words they remembered having looked up. As such, the study may be of interest to both dictionary compilers and those foreign language teachers who may want to use the results in showing the students how to use their dictionaries more effectively.

Key words: dictionary use, reference skills, user training, writing in L2, advanced learners

Introduction

The compositions philology students submit contain many often rather basic language errors. Many of them could easily be avoided had one decided to look up the problematic words. Teachers know about that; they also know that before entering the university/college, their students' contact with a dictionary was rather limited as well as that many of those used were inappropriate from the point of view of their reference needs. Consequently, it should come as of little surprise that one of the first things many foreign language teachers do is to recommend buying a 'good' English dictionary.

Unfortunately, as many classroom practitioners must have also noticed, consulting a dictionary does not always guarantee a flawless performance. A good case in point is errors in the so-called 'WW' ('Wrong Word') category: teachers often have to 'explain themselves' to students for having marked a word used in a composition as 'inappropriate'— a decision which students question, claiming that it is from a dictionary that the problematic item has been retrieved. Not infrequently, too, a student claims s/he tried to look up a certain word or an expression, but was unable to find it.

And indeed, it is true that dictionaries cannot be expected to answer all questions which prompt their use. On the other hand and as amply demonstrated by studies into the use of

dictionaries, many unsuccessful searches are due to the lack of what is referred to as 'reference skills', for instance the ability to choose the right dictionary or to find the information needed. Obviously, recommending a 'good' dictionary is not enough: one often notices that in order to use it to its maximum potential, students would actually have to be shown how to use (and how not to use) it in the first place.

However, teaching dictionary skills seems to be one of those areas where offering 'ready-made solutions to teachers [...] would be an impossible task, because there are too many differences between the various groups of users, according mainly to their language(s) and to their levels of linguistic competence' (Béjoint 1989:208) as well as additional factors among which Béjoint (1989:209) lists the users' present or future occupation. In consequence, specific objectives to be achieved while working with a particular group will logically vary from those to be achieved while working with a different group of students, even if both groups may be at the same level. But, in spite of such differences, '[t]he question that each instructor will have to answer is the following: What do I want my students to be able to do with their dictionary or dictionaries by the end of the teaching period?' (Béjoint 1989:209). The aim of a small-scale study conducted at the end of the 2011/12 academic year and reported below was to determine if the compositions students produce could help teachers of writing establish which skills required for the successful use of a dictionary have been mastered to a sufficient extent and which might need some improvement, thus answering the question posed by Béjoint.

In addition to this short introduction, the article consists of four parts. In the section to follow, I intend to present a brief review of the main developments recorded within metalexigraphy's youngest branch, user-oriented studies. Next, the results of the study conducted will be presented and put in context which, in our case, entails discussing the main linguistic problems singled out from the corpus of the students' compositions used in the study, which could be avoided with the help of a dictionary. In the last major section of the paper I will try to formulate a list of possible problem areas to be worked on with *this* particular group of students.

The Main Points of Focus in User-Oriented Research

Since user-oriented studies have been conducted in many different educational settings, at many proficiency levels and against a wide variety of first language backgrounds (Cowie 1999:177), the literature on the topic is, predictably, enormous. But if one were to limit his or her attention to only the first decade during which studies of this type started to be conducted regularly (as surveyed in Hartmann 1987), one would already get an idea of the main points of focus around which they were centered as well as the main findings obtained. One of those findings concerns meaning and spelling as two major information categories of linguistic information which motivate dictionary consultation (Barnhart 1962; Béjoint 1981; Marelllo 1989; Tomaszczyk 1979) – ‘a generalization that applies as much to foreign as to native users’ (Cowie 1999:178). The studies conducted between late 1970s and 1980s and later on also provide evidence on the dictionary types users in various countries and different educational milieus in which dictionaries are reached for: collegiate (i.e. native-speaker) dictionaries in the case of American freshmen students (Barnhart 1962) or bi- as well as monolingual ones (Al-Ajmi 1992; Atkins and Varantola 1997; Bareggi 1989; Marelllo 1989; Tomaszczyk 1979) in all those places where English is taught as a foreign language. Other major issues which these and similarly oriented studies have tended to raise include, among others:

- (a) the users’ awareness of the content, structure and functions of various dictionary types;
- (b) the users’ level of satisfaction with a particular dictionary type (e.g. both Marelllo’s and Tomaszczyk’s respondents rated their MLDs more highly than their BDs);
- (c) specific deficiencies in dictionaries (e.g. the lack of a specific type of information) which made the users critical towards them (Coviello 1987; Sora 1984);
- (d) the typical study activities in the support of which dictionaries are put to use (Béjoint 1981; Marelllo 1989; Tomaszczyk 1979), with reading comprehension and, generally, activities in the written medium prioritized over those in the spoken medium (listening comprehension; speaking);
- (e) the usually poor standard of reference skills demonstrated by various user groups (Bareggi 1989; Nesi and Meara 1994; Nuccorini 1994; Tono 1984).¹

¹ The types of studies presented above correspond with the major categories of studies classifiable as ‘dictionary research’ as specified by, for instance, Dolezal and Mc Creary (1996), McCreary and Dolezal (1998), Tono (1998) or Wiegand (1998). As regards the major investigative techniques used in user research, see Hartmann (2001:116-120).

Regarding the research methods used as well as the studies' size, a generalization which applies to all user-centred studies is that experiments which involve control of a relatively small number of variables (e.g. the aforementioned study by Tono used only two key variables) are usually ranked higher than questionnaires, especially those unsupported by any other investigative technique(s), whereas grand scale research projects (e.g. Atkins *et al.* 1987; Atkins and Knowles 1990; Tomaszczyk 1979) are favoured over studies which are small in scale, such as the one whose results are presented in the section below.

The Study's Results

The study was conducted at the Institute of English Studies of the University of Rzeszów. In order to obtain the data, a group of over 30 second year (i.e. advanced) students was asked to go over the compositions they once wrote in class and kept, trying to underline all words they remembered having looked up. The students were also asked to comment on what prompted the search as well as – possibly – what dictionary types were used to retrieve this information. The mini-corpus collected in this way consisted of only eleven compositions, its total size being 4.278 words. Some of the compositions being unsigned, I am assuming nine students responded to my request – the anonymous ones used different typographical conventions from those present in the compositions which could be identified by name.

Concerning the type of information accessed, an English translation equivalent came first: out of the total 41 look-ups performed, twenty (48.7 per cent) were motivated with not knowing how to say something in English. The second most frequently looked up information category was spelling (e.g. *teeny-tiny* or **teny-tiny*) – eleven (26.8 per cent) of all look-ups performed. The third most frequently checked information category consisted in what can be referred to by means of a shorthand, catch-all term 'grammatical information' (7 look-ups altogether, which amounts to 17 per cent) and which, in this case, involved checking up a preposition (e.g. *rummage around* or *through*; four look-ups), checking up the past tense form of a verb, checking up the negative prefix to be used with *forgivable* and checking up a correct word form (*runaround* or *runarounds?*). The last category of look-ups involved miscellanea: checking the meaning of *suitability*, a word which appeared in a model composition handed out during a class devoted to writing assessment reports and which the student wanted to use in her own composition, checking if a word such as *bubbling* does exist

and, finally, looking for a paraphrase of *I was made sure*, an expression which also appeared in a model composition and which the student apparently did not want to repeat.

As for the dictionary types used, based on the descriptions provided by the students it is impossible to classify them but in terms of three features only: the medium, the languages and the user type. Concerning the medium, electronic dictionaries were used for 28, whereas paper ones for 14 look-ups.² As for the distinction between mono- and bilingual dictionaries, the use of the first dictionary type was reported by one student. Another student has reported having used a bilingualised dictionary – a lexicographic hybrid which, in this case, has both definitions formulated in English as well as Polish translation equivalents. All the remaining dictionaries used were bilingual ones. Finally, since both the monolingual and the bilingualised works of reference were described as ‘Collins’ (which probably stands for *Collins COBUILD*) and *OxfordWordpower*, one may assume that at least two of the dictionaries used were dictionaries addressed at foreign learners of English.

Of course, data such as presented above are, in themselves, meaningless: one can hardly object to the number of look-ups performed by an individual if what one has been presented with what is an otherwise good composition. Consequently, the only way to comment on what the students did is by juxtaposing it with data on what they did not (but should have) looked up, to be discussed below.

Putting the Results in Context

As one may remember, the major reason for which this group turned to a dictionary was to find an English translation equivalent of a Polish word that they wanted to use in the compositions. The number of look ups in this category (twenty, which amounts to 48.7 per cent of all look ups performed by the group) hardly did it: the compositions still contained a considerable number of errors (47) in the ‘Wrong Word’ category which could have been avoided had the students looked respective items up and which can be classified into the following four major types:

² The discrepancy between the total thus obtained (42, as contrasted with 41 look-ups reported in the preceding section) can be explained by the fact that one of them was a complex search, carried out in two different dictionaries (a paper and an electronic one, although the student does not say in what order).

WW1: using a wrong collocate;³

WW2: using a word which cannot be used in this particular context (e.g. because it is too formal, as when one would use *error* instead of *mistake*);⁴

WW3: repeating a word (usually all-time perennials such as *nice* or *good*) several times;

WW4: using a nonexistent 'English' expression which was a literal translation of its Polish equivalent.⁵

As for the second most frequently looked up information category – spelling – one could notice that, also in this category, the eleven (26.8 per cent) look-ups performed still left the group altogether with 33 spelling errors which have not been taken care of. The uncorrected errors can, in turn, be said to form the following categories:

S1: failing to use capitals for adjectives (e.g. **english*) or using capitals when none are needed (*Catholic* vs *catholic*);

S2: inappropriate use of apostrophe in possessive nouns;

S3: misspelling nouns with irregular plural (e.g. **lifes*);

³ This category does not entail using a collocate which may, initially, seem incorrect, but on closer reading can be interpreted as a well-thought decision implemented to achieve a certain rhetorical effect, as is, for instance, the case with the so-called context-induced metaphors (for more on this metaphor type see, for instance, Pikor-Niedziątek 2012).

⁴ One of the mistakes of this type detected involved a situation in which a student who wanted to say that 'fining students for dropping the litter [...] is not a good idea, because it will ___ our parents not us personally', looked for the English equivalent of *obciążyć* in an electronic Polish-English dictionary and next uncritically accepted *surcharge* as an item that will fit this conceptual slot. This kind of behaviour may be indicative of a number of problems. Firstly, the individual concerned seems to be acting on a conviction that 'dictionaries simply cannot be wrong in their descriptions of meaning or of usage' (Béjoint 1989:208) or – to rephrase – that it is simply an impossibility that a dictionary should fall short of providing sufficient semantic specifications. Had this particular student known that when she uses a BD, but is not sure which word to choose (I am assuming *surcharge* was not the only translation equivalent of *obciążyć* listed in the work she consulted), she should next look it up in a learner's dictionary, she would have learned that a *surcharge* is 'an *additional* [italics added] amount of money that you must pay for something over the usual price'. But insufficient reference skills is only one of the aspects her dictionary behaviour seems to be pointing at: it seems that both she as well as all others (note that all searches for an English translation equivalent were simple searches, usually performed on electronic dictionaries) treat a foreign language as 'simply another means of labeling the conceptual system of the mother tongue' (Cowie 1999:196).

⁵ The problem of literal translation into L2 is often addressed in dictionary workbooks, although it seems that in most of them (e.g. Pätzold and Schnorr 1985; Dam-Jensen 1978, Birch 1983a and b; Schütz 1985), it is discussed in the context of translating idioms and proverbs only.

S4: incorrect spelling of derived forms (e.g. the past verb forms such as *permitted*);

S5: incorrect spelling of compounds (e.g. **old fashioned*);

S6: an inconsistent use of British and American spelling (as when one would use, for instance, the British English *plough* and then the American English *color*).

Turning now to the seven look ups performed in the 'grammatical information' category (which, as one may remember, amounts to 17 per cent of all look ups performed), they involved checking up a preposition (four look-ups), the past tense form, the negative prefix and, finally, a correct word form. The look ups did hardly suffice to eliminate all grammatical mistakes from the compositions (altogether 73 uncorrected ones have been left), classifiable, this time, into the following subcategories:

G1: problems with the syntactic behaviour of verbs (the so-called 'verb patterns');

G2: problems with using the article;

G3: using the wrong adverb (e.g. *late* vs *lately*);

G4: problems which seem to be due to the fact that a student may have assumed that it is, in principle, possible to use a single English word for a single Polish one);

G5: problems with the syntactic behaviour of phrasal verbs (e.g. whether a verb is separable from the particle by an object);

G6: using a multi-element English expression attributively (**a piercing hurting ears silence*);

G7: using an uncountable noun as if it were countable and vice versa;

G8: problems with the relative ordering of adjectives.

Finally, not a single look up performed aimed at correcting and improving one's punctuation.⁶ The type of punctuation errors encountered in the eleven compositions were basically of the same type as those identified with the help of learner corpora such as the Louvain International Corpus of Learner English, of about 4 million words and containing texts from 16 different mother-tongue backgrounds, and included:

⁶ Indeed, students are often surprised to learn that a dictionary is one of these sources which can be used in order to avoid this error type. Note that a grammar checker on a computer cannot help identify all punctuation errors: after all, both defining and non-defining clauses *are* grammatically 'correct'.

P1: an overuse of ellipsis dots (usually in order to add effects such as irony or humour);

P2: an overuse of exclamation marks in formal writing (e.g. a letter of complaint);

P3: using a comma in a list consisting of only two items;

P4: run on sentences in which a comma was used to join two main clauses.

In connection with the last problem specified, note that the compositions did not contain a single semicolon, which is one of the strategies to avoid run on sentences. Another frequent problem was no spacing between a word and a punctuation mark, the use of dash in formal writing and using a hyphen instead of a dash.

The total number of 153 errors detected in the first three categories ('WW', 'Spelling' and 'Grammar') which could have been avoided with the help of a dictionary implies that this group of students could, indeed, benefit from a brief revision of categories which typically make the 'Writing Checklist' sections included in most textbooks for writing, such as 'grammar' or 'spelling'. Additionally, one notices there is little match between the uncorrected error types reported in this section and the results reported in the preceding one devoted, as one may remember, to the actual purposes for which a dictionary *was* used. It is on the basis of these two that an attempt will be made to briefly discuss translating the study's results into a number of specific objectives to be worked towards with this particular group of students, which partly addresses the issue raised in the introductory section, namely, what it is that these students should be able to do with their dictionary or dictionaries by the end of the teaching period.

Specific Objectives to be Worked towards with the Student Group Assessed

As briefly signaled above, it seems that the group whose dictionary behaviour was being assessed might have to be reminded of what precisely is meant by such all encompassing labels as 'WW'.⁷ Next, one should make sure they know which dictionary to use in order to avoid problems in a specific subcategory. For instance, the right collocate (WW1) may

⁷ Note that many mistakes which may be classified as 'using a wrong word' also entail selecting a word which does not allow one to make his or her ideas clearer and expressing precisely what one means to say (as when one would use *brightgold* instead of *glittering* or *sparklinggold* which gives a clearer picture of the gold). Such specific words suggest vivid details. Needless to say, the more exact and concrete one's writing is, the more interesting and alive will it be for the reader.

potentially be looked up in three different dictionary types: a specialist dictionary of collocations, a monolingual foreign learner's dictionary and a good quality bilingual dictionary; repetition (WW3) may be avoided with the help of a dictionary of synonyms, a collocation dictionary and an MLD, and so on. The type of dictionaries they used shows that choosing the right dictionary type may be one of those areas in which improvement seems necessary.⁸

Another issue that should be addressed with this particular student group would be familiarizing them with the contents of entries in the three aforementioned dictionary types.⁹ For instance, they would have to be reminded that both MLDs and good quality BDs offer them a number of stylistic labels which may help them avoid the type of mistakes coded above as WW2. Since labels are usually abbreviated, the user must not only learn to pay attention to the abbreviations used by a dictionary s/he owns, but also know their meaning, usually explained in the front matter, which in turn calls for familiarity with the overall dictionary structure and not just its main part (dictionary proper).¹⁰

By contrast with general-purpose dictionaries, specialist ones (in this case synonym or collocation dictionaries) usually do not offer information on the degree of formality a word

⁸ Needless to say, the type of a dictionary to be selected depends on what it is that one needs to find. In the case of spelling, it often does not matter what dictionary type has been used. By contrast, when it comes to 'the fine semantic, grammatical, and stylistic specifications, and a wider range of illustrative examples, which are noteworthy strengths of the monolingual learner's dictionary' (Cowie 1999:196), retrieving them not only calls for a higher level of competence, but also knowledge that some dictionary types fall short of providing this information type and should, thus, be replaced with works of reference with which the retrieval rate can be expected to be higher.

⁹ This is basically in line with a model presenting the main stages of a dictionary reference act which, according to Hartmann (2001:90-91), should feature such elements as 'the realisation on the part of the user that there is a problem arising from the activity in which he or she is engaged', followed by a 'decision to find a solution for it by determining what the problem word might be', 'selecting the most appropriate reference work, then searching in its macrostructure for the appropriate headword', continuing the search 'inside the microstructure for the entry section where the sought data may be located', 'extracting the information, and integrating it into the text that prompted the reference process in the first place.'

¹⁰ Actually, the only situation which points at a student's awareness of the overall structure of her dictionary involved the use of a medium-size bilingualised *Oxford Wordpower* – a type which, '[a]s Hartmann shows (1994:208) [...] is of a very limited usefulness for writing in, or translating into, the foreign language, since the dictionary normally provides no alphabetical means of access to the glosses in the user's mother tongue' (Cowie 1999:195), except when it is additionally furnished with an index. Since the student used the dictionary for an English translation equivalent of a Polish word, one may assume that this is where she was checking it up – in the index which, in the case of *Oxford Wordpower*, is located in the back matter. Other than that, none of the searches performed in paper dictionaries indicates that this group of students ever ventures beyond the main word list.

represents; this, in turn, calls for combined use, the aim of which would be checking the adequacy of the information found in a dictionary. Indeed, one of the typical mistakes advanced level learners make in the context of these two dictionary types is that they typically select unfamiliar, 'impressive' words from the range of possibilities given. Consequently, they must be warned not to use a word that they see for the first time: if they have never read a word before, it is not likely that they will use it correctly for their writing purposes.

As for the spelling errors, it seems that also in this category, the group in question could benefit from a brief revision of all major subcategories that may next be marked as a spelling mistake. Next, as shown by a number of studies, most students would benefit from guidance on strategies for locating a word whose complete spelling is not known (How can one find a word in a dictionary if one cannot spell it?) as well as strategies which can be of use if a word sought cannot be located at the spelling originally imagined. Another important issue to be addressed entails making sure that they are familiar with the most basic lexicographic conventions which one must know in order to locate an item whose spelling one needs to check in a dictionary – conventions without which they will not be able to use a dictionary 'in the way their compilers intended them to be' (Béjoint 1989:208). Note that these may vary: for instance, in some dictionaries irregular verb forms and irregular comparative and superlative adjective forms are given headword status whereas in others (a more common practice) they are listed at the main (i.e. uninflected) form. Another lexicographic convention dictionary compilers resort to is to place compounds and derivatives at the end of an entry, from which it follows that locating items in these two categories presupposes being familiar with entry construction.¹¹

Of course, such skills are of little use if a student is unable to locate an incorrectly spelt word in his or her composition. In view of my previous experience, the biggest problem students often complain about is that they have never been taught a *sensible* strategy which

¹¹ Differences such as those referred to above also concern other types of information placed in dictionary entries. For instance, as argued by Stark (1990:172, as based on McAlpin (1988:17)), to find an idiom, a user of *LDOCE* would have to learn to distinguish between 'short idioms (e.g. "greenfingers") [which] may have autonomous headword status, whilst longer idioms ("keep one's fingers crossed") are listed under a key word.' However, continues Stark (1990:173), authors such as Fox and Kirby (1987:35) or Heath *et al.* (1989:14) have amply demonstrated that cases in which a particular strategy for finding a multi-word expression may fail are so numerous that users should rather prepare for complex rather than simple searches.

would help them determine which of the words they used have been misspelled and should, therefore, be looked up. As for those strategies they *are* familiar with, asking another student to go over one's composition is usually considered impractical; checking for spelling errors and circling each word one thinks one has misspelled is too time-consuming (and so are strategies such as repeating the word one thinks one has misspelled aloud and listening to the sounds).¹² Not infrequently, too, students admit that their past experience has taught them that heavy dictionary use to eliminate spelling mistakes has little contribution to make in achieving a higher grade, since their (typically long and relatively advanced) compositions were always getting them a mark they were satisfied with anyway. In short, the compositions they are about to submit probably contain some spelling mistakes they did not bother to correct, which is an attitude problem.

Concerning the last major type of errors discussed above, existing studies on the users' awareness of the content, structure and functions of various dictionary types have demonstrated that learners may not even suspect that detailed guidance on various aspects of the English grammar is one of the designing features of (especially) learner's dictionaries. In consequence, grammatical information is either consistently overlooked by them (Heath *et al.* 1989:15) or 'used much less than could have been expected' (Béjoint 1989:208). A particularly good case in point is very detailed information on article use and the complementation patterns used with verbs, nouns and adjectives. Considered a major challenge for learners of English, both are often treated at two places, in the respective entries as well as in the special study sections which are usually placed in the middle matter. As in the case of stylistic labels, grammatical information is typically presented by means of codes whose meaning must also be known if one is to benefit from its presence in the dictionary.

Needless to say, this brief demonstration of how the results reported above set against the background of the mistake types which remained unaddressed might translate into specific classroom objectives hardly exhausts the topic of introducing a dictionary to a learner group. Among those issues that have not been discussed one should undoubtedly mention the

¹² A possible reason why one of the students, who reported two look ups in the spelling category, has still submitted a composition containing six *uncorrected* (rather basic) spelling mistakes (**hide and sick*, **suns (sons)*, **save (safe)*, **riding (reading)*, **haunting trophies*, **extra blanked (blanket)*).

students' awareness of those problem areas that no dictionary can help to overcome.¹³ Secondly, as argued elsewhere (Osuchowska 2007), since many students enter a college or university with a conviction that if they managed to survive without a dictionary for such a long time, why bother now, not infrequently, too, before trying to teach them some dictionary skills, one may discover that it would actually be necessary to change the students' attitude towards a dictionary. This may be difficult to achieve unless the teacher shows them s/he understands that the way *they* may see it is that it does interfere with the writing process, elongates the time spent on the written homework to a considerable extent – in short, as one of my students aptly noticed, that consulting one often means 'a lot of pain and little or no gain', at least not in the foreseeable future.¹⁴

Conclusion

Most researchers believe that studies that employ large samples should get more credit than those based on small samples, because correlations are known to become more stable as the sample size increases – a fact that may deter even the most experienced classroom practitioners from carrying out their own research projects that would have a direct value for their teaching. However, it seems that, if conducted at the beginning of a writing course, even a small-scale study such as the one described in the foregoing can help the teacher identify the

¹³ Those which appeared in the compositions collected entailed (i) not knowing the characteristics of the kind of writing they were supposed to do; (ii) failing to choose a topic one cares about; (iii) being unable to limit the topic to one specific event (in the case of the personal narrative); (iv) including details which were irrelevant for the topic (unsuitable content); (v) stylistic problems (as when a composition would consist predominantly of simple sentences); (vi) being unable to introduce a paragraph's topic with a proper topic sentence; (vii) not being able to organize one's material in sequence. Of course, each of them calls for a different strategy which would help students avoid them in their future compositions, with, for instance clustering (also called the inverted triangle) as a technique which should help one limit the topic. It can be assumed that, in many cases, introducing such a strategy should, preferably, be accompanied by a short discussion concerning the negative effect problems such as those identified above will have on the quality of their writing. Thus students need to understand that sometimes for the writing to be clearer, some of the sentences will have to be rearranged (problems with organization) as much as they need to understand the negative effect short, choppy sentences will have on the reader. They must also realize that writing is difficult when one is bored with his/her subject.

¹⁴ Note that some scholars attribute the students' resistance to using a dictionary to their level of competence in the foreign language. For instance, Bensoussan *et al.* (1984, cited in Cowie 2001:191) argues that 'effective use of a dictionary (especially a learner's dictionary) already calls for a high level of reading comprehension. Thus, as Bensoussan *et al.* point out, low-level students lack the competence to profit from dictionaries, while advanced level students know enough of the L2 to be able to do without them!'

most frequent types of errors a particular group of students should concentrate on as well as diagnose the level of their reference skills.¹⁵ This includes their familiarity with various types of dictionaries available as well as their contents and structure. Although it still leaves open the question of the types of activities to be used with the students, the sources from which such activities could be retrieved as well as the relative order in which particular skills should be introduced, to name a few, it at least gives one some preliminary ideas on *what* to teach. Most importantly, however, starting with the students' compositions gives one an opportunity to introduce a dictionary in the context of the actual purposes for which a dictionary is used by a group in question and not some artificial, dictionary-oriented exercises whose contents usually differ from what one is required to do in a specific learning situation.

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¹⁵ Note, however, that when one asks about the dictionary behaviour a group of users who are somehow dependent on him/her (as is normally the case with a researcher who happens to be the respondents' teacher), special care has to be taken in order not to affect the users' responses in any way. There seems little point in 'asking' one's students' opinion concerning the usefulness of various dictionary types after one has spoken in favour of one of them. By the same token, the teacher's attitude towards the mistakes students make may affect the way they would respond to a question concerning the frequency of use. To minimize the negative effects of the fact that the subjects of this study have, for a short period of time, worked under my supervision, I decided to postpone the study until mid June 2012, the time after the students sat for their final exam in practical English at which I acted as one of the examiners. Needless to say, this particular decision had a negative affect on my retrieval rate which would have been much higher had I decided to carry the study out with the writing class still in progress (which would yield over thirty compositions), not to mention the fact that – with the writing class being over – the results obtained could not be used to improve *these* students' reference skills. On the positive note, it can be assumed that – knowing that the evaluation period is over – they probably felt comfortable demonstrating their 'normal' dictionary behaviour rather than some kind of behaviour they normally do not engage in, but which – as they might assume – would be more up to their teacher's expectations (which might, for instance, result in an abnormally high number of look-ups being performed to show the teacher they *do* care about making progress).

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